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NAGGING WOMEN.

A REPLY TO DR. EDSON.

BY LADY HENRY SOMERSET, HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD, AND
MARION HARLAND.

I.

THE analysis given us by Dr. Cyrus Edson of the demerits of nagging as a science and an art is doubtless in the main correct. If that well-known specialist had made his criticisms apply to "a nervous man or woman" all through the article, as they do on the first page, he would have been more just, and as a consequence the good he doubtless has in view would have been more general and unquestioned. For those of us who have been widely observant of human life are perfectly aware that nagging is not a vice that attaches to sex, but is rather the outcome of a physical condition that is chiefly dependent on environment. Persons who wear their nerves on the outside of their skin will be difficult to live with, and whether they are men or women will make very little difference. If they are men and have a small orbit through which they wriggle from day to day, it will be a punishment well-nigh unendurable to cross that orbit even at a tangent. If they are women and have wide interests, much variety of occupation, and spend a good deal of time in the open air, they will probably belong to that class of whom it is written that if they cannot be cured they can be at least endured.

Any discussion of the nagging woman that fails to take into account the fact that she lives in a house instead of in the open, as we say in England; that she breathes a vitiated atmosphere most of the time—I mean the average woman; that she bears the strain of wifely and motherly cares minus the compensation that results from mingling with the daily life of the world and coming

into touch with its multifarious and inspiring interests, is to my mind unscientific. Take the average man and put him in similar surroundings, encase him in the same restricted garments that women wear, and the word "a nagging woman" would but feebly describe his condition, for he would be likely to become either mildly lunatic or altogether imbecile. The strength of woman's mind and body is illustrated beyond a peradventure by her survival in spite of the adverse physical conditions that surround her from the cradle to the grave, and on behalf of women in general may I intimate that it is a little trying to be restricted to the house, to have our costume determined by men—for their interests as manufacturers and merchants and their pride in the personal appearance of their women have combined to do this throughout the centuries—and then to have them turn upon us and describe us as the nagging sex when we are really, and have been from the first, the nagged. It is wonderful to see how the broader life of the last few years has diminished the nervousness of women, because it has given them access to God's free air and to a larger and hence a more normal life.

Let this good work go on ; let the education, occupations and aspirations of men and women become more and more allied, and the children of the future will be obliged to look into "A Dictionary of Words Grown Obsolete" to find the odious words "nag, nagger, nagging." May all sensible men and women, all philanthropists and reformers, all mothers and statesmen, combine their forces to speed that better day.

ISABEL SOMERSET.

II.

It would be idle to dispute his statement of facts with the learned physician acquainted with the secrets of households and the labyrinths of our common nature. But it may be pardonable if one draws other inferences from the facts than those which satisfy him.

If, as it has been admitted in a recent article in this REVIEW, "the woman who nags suffers," is it really true that we "need not waste much pity" on her? And, moreover, that if her husband does not beat her, it might be better if he did?

I never could look at the early pictures of the woman in the

ducking-stool—mentioned without reprobation in that article—surrounded by a mocking crowd of men and boys, delighted with her torture, without the greatest pity for the woman and the greatest abhorrence for her tormentors. What caused the poor woman's furious temper—what day-long and life-long receipt of outrage and injury upon a temperament aggravated perhaps before she was born by her mother's receipt of the same sort of injustice and tyranny?

It is quite frankly acknowledged, in the outspoken article to which I refer, that "nagging women," as they are termed, are unquestionably invalids. So fully is this acknowledged that cases are cited of those who have died of their temper ;—although it has generally been thought that the violent temper which finds expression saves its owner. The specific statement is made that their habit of mind starves their bodies, the nervous excitement bringing on an inability to digest, and the inability to digest increasing the nervous excitement, a condition as unfortunate as that vicious circle involving the existence of the spider, the spider which cannot eat if she does not spin, and cannot spin if she does not eat.

But it is the business of the physician to heal the sick, not to accuse them. "Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!" Surely in the avoidance found by this poor victim rather of abnormal susceptibility than of evil tendency, her face written in many lines with the script of her ails, in repulsion, in disgust, in disdain, there is already punishment. And are there not yet unwhipped vices on which the ingenuity of those that have a taste for this sort of thing can be exercised ?

It is, moreover, confessed that these sufferers are not accountable. "As over two-thirds of their grievances are imaginary,—that is, as two-thirds of the grievances for which they scold have no existence except as inventions in their own diseased brains,—the inability of insanity to distinguish between the real and the unreal has begun to show itself." Now, if their grievances are imaginary, they are irresponsible. And is it of any use to argue with an irresponsible or insane person as to the advisability of accepting annoyance without remark, or to propound mathematical statements to such an one as to the action and reaction of the draft of anger and of study upon the nervous force ? It may be, however, that this mathematical presentation of the

effect of nagging upon the nervous system as *xy* would be better expressed by *xy* $\sqrt{-1}$, which carries the illustration where it belongs, into the region of the "Imaginaries."

The unpleasant women under discussion are capable, it seems by the statement of their rebuker, of doing any one of three things, perhaps not all three put together, nor all at once. They can make a husband brutal and profane ; they can cause him to resort to bar-rooms and drunkenness ; they can drive him to a madhouse.

Is there then so little stamina in the male nature ?

"The woman tempted me, and I did eat."

But in point of fact, one has known husbands who were brutal whose wives were patient, long-suffering little Griseldas ; husbands that were profane whose gentle wives shrank from an oath as from a blow, men who looked on the wine when it was red because they liked it, and who beggared and disgraced their families and drove their wives to their graves by means of it, and men who went to a madhouse because their fathers had abused their silent and submissive mothers for generations before them.

Indeed, everything of which this arraignment accuses wives is equally true of husbands. May not the time-honored jests concerning the mother-in-law and the mother's cookery be summoned as witnesses ? Is there no husband whose return home is dreaded by every one in the house, from the wife to the cat ; no husband whose wife lives with a worse than the sword of Damocles over her head in the knowledge that the least conscious or unconscious sin of omission or commission would furnish him excuse for seeking pleasures away from her ; no husband whose perpetual accusation and fault-finding have made his wife's last wish at night one that she might not wake up in the morning ? Speaking of madhouses, if there are none of these husbands, why is it that the preponderance of the inhabitants of these places are unhappy wives ?

Two wrongs truly do not make one right ; but why speak as if the wrong were all on one side ? In reality, there is no sex in nagging. A husband may make his wife as wretched as a wife may make her husband. And I have even known a man who at the table stared his children out of countenance, gazing at them with great, cruel eyes till their own eyes fell, and they were unable to swallow in his presence.

It is quite as certain, as it is that it takes two to make a quarrel, that the distressing habit of nagging belongs no more to women than to men. We must all desire to see it abandoned ; but, since wherever there is ill-temper there is always a cause for it, either in one's own disorder or in another's wrong-doing, perhaps we shall first have to see human nature perfected, and, alas ! perfectibility is like the landscape of which the Irish gentleman, travelling by rail, remarked that you no sooner fix your eyes upon it than it is out of sight.

HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD.

III.

THE name of the distinguished physician and *savant*, Dr. Cyrus Edson, commends his *dicta* upon "nagging women" to readers and thinkers. He dissects the unpleasant "subject" deftly ; he classifies the disease judiciously. That in one section of the clever essay he admits the habit of nagging to be symptomatic, in certain cases, of grave physical disorders, may excuse, in part, the presumption of the non-professional woman who ventures to protest against the trend of his treatise.

Without asserting in so many words that "the woman who ceaselessly complains and scolds, and generally makes a nuisance of herself to every one who is cursed by being brought into contact with her," represents a large proportion of her sex, our essayist so far succeeds in impressing the reader's mind to this effect as to throw him upon the defensive, if he be a man, by quickening his apprehensions of personal peril. Variations of the temper-thermometer he has passed over as common to all classes and conditions of women, may be the incipient stages of the "cursed shrewishness" that drives men to madness and murders love, and sometimes, in scorpion-fashion, stings the shrew herself to death. Nagging grows by what it feeds upon. What a tolerant, because ignorant, husband may be ready to excuse as passing petulance may be a cockatrice-egg. "Continual streams of scolding, lasting three or four hours" may await him in the future unless heroic measures are adopted without delay. He will not be so ready to "kiss and make up" the next time he is chidden for carrying an important letter in his pocket for a week after it was given to him to post.

The conclusion may not be logical, but all readers of THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW and all admirers of Dr. Edson are not logicians. To the average intellect the article under discussion has the tone of a medical manifesto issued at the approach of pestilence.

Whoever, by tongue or pen, upholds the mischievous theory of the natural antagonism of the sexes wrongs both. It is fashionable nowadays to teach and to hold that the best condition to be hoped for in the estate of matrimony is an armed neutrality. Every loving woman and true-hearted man resent the suggestion. In estimating that among many thousands of married couples there are scores of nagging wives and brutal husbands, we no more assail the general comfortableness of conjugal life than we brand as sickly a community where there are occasional outbreaks of scarlet fever and, now and then, a case of typhoid.

The glorious truth stands fast that the fullest measure of happiness known to humanity abides and endures in the Home. To harmonize the elements of the family that make the Home is true philanthropy. Fear of a disease leads to suspicion that the seeds of the malady lurk in the system. Belief in the presence of an epidemic speedily breeds it. It is wisdom, no less than kindness, to make the best of existing conditions; to represent moral and physical health as normal, diseases of body or mind as violence done to natural laws, and therefore exceptional in the tale of human experience.

Every woman who reads these lines bears witness with me to the infrequency in Christian homes of the scenes outlined by our author's graphic pen as common, if not general. We know that for every household where "the essence of nagging" is pungently evident to the home-coming husband and father, five hundred are swept and garnished for the return of the head and bread-winner. For every wife who meets her weary husband at evening with "fault-finding and scolding," one thousand dress worn faces in smiles and muster cheery phrases for the welcome of the jaded man. I am continually moved to admiration by the heroic and tactful ingenuity displayed by commonplace women in turning the bright side of their hard, prosaic lives toward the husbands who put into the dock of home for rest and repairs after the day's cruising in the windy world. I maintain that these are the representative wives and mothers of our land,

and that the sporadic outbursts of a temper frayed by domestic worries, the rebellion of nerves overtaxed by watching, soft overailing girls and wailing babies and wild boys—not to mention the mother's physical mal-ease—call for the widest breadth and warmest folding of the cloak of charity, rather than for critical analysis. These women may sin much or little in this regard. They also love much.

Dr. Edson palliates the fretting and scolding of the actual invalid. I subscribe gladly to the justice of his tribute to the magnanimity of his sex in such circumstances. I go still further in saying that tender and clear-sighted husbands who are incidentally made to smart under healthy, but worried women's impatient speech, readily forgive and hasten to forget shaft and smart in consideration of the provocation to sharp or bitter words.

I doubt if in the social grade where the baited victim of the nagger takes refuge in the corner saloon instead of his club, the vice of persistent fault-finding and scolding be as prevalent as our brilliant essayist would incline us to think. When the brakes of love, religion, and conventional refinement are not applied to the temper, prudence, learned from experience, comes into play. Unless a woman be a rank fool she comprehends that where she, figuratively or literally, uses her nails, the husband or father will reply with his fists. For her own and her children's sakes she would fain keep her master in a good humor. One reads every day of wives who are beaten because their husband's dinners are not ready in time, or their suppers not cooked to the tyrants' taste. Even the inveterate nagger has lucid intervals in which she appreciates the might of brute force and the expediency of living on amicable terms with the money-getter.

The wheedling wife—the born and bred diplomatist—is more to be dreaded by him who aspires to rule despotically in his small world than the rarer specimen of a class our forefathers essayed to abolish by the discipline of the branks and the ducking-stool.

MARION HARLAND.